

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 AID-05 EB-07 STR-01 OMB-01 TRSE-00 IO-10

COA-01 DLOS-03 SIL-01 LAB-04 COME-00 OES-03 FEA-01

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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 1058

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, PINT, CO

SUBJECT: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. BOGOTANOS APPEARED TO BE MORE INTERESTED IN ENJOYING THE CLEAR
SKIES AND WARM DAYS OF THE DRY SEASON THAN IN FOLLOWING PUBLIC EVENTS

.
THE CANCELLATION OF THE BUENOS AIRES MINISTERIAL MEETING ELICITED A
HARSH BUT LITTLE NOTED COMMENT FROM FOREIGN MINISTER LIEVANO. THE
DISCOVERY OF ELEVEN BODIES IN A RURAL AREA NEAR THE VENEZUELAN BORDER

,
AND EVENT THAT IN THE NOT SO DISTANT PAST WOULD HAVE OCCASIONED A
SPATE

OF ANTI-VENEZUELAN SENTIMENT, WAS, INSTEAD, NOTABLE FOR THE CALM
STATEMENT OF THE GOC OFFICIALS INVESTIGATING THE MATTER. THE
GASOLINE RETAILERS RESCINDED THEIR UNAUTHORIZED PRICE INCREASE AS
ORDERED BY THE GOVERNMENT AND THE LIBERAL PARTY CONTINUED ITS EFFORTS
OF THE PAST HALF YEAR TO SORT OUT ITS DIRECTORATE AND MAINTAIN ITS
UNITY. COLOMBIANS DURING THE PAST WEEK SHUNNED THE AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES
FOR CONFRONTATION AND SAVORED THE POLITICAL CALM AND FINE WEATHER.

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2. FOREIGN MINISTER LIEVANO, IN A JANUARY 27 STATEMENT, CITED THE FAILURE OF THE QUITO MINISTERIAL MEETING TO LIFT THE CUBAN SANCTIONS AS THE CAUSE FOR THE POSTPONEMENT OF THE BUENOS AIRES CONFERENCE. LIEVANO, WHO HAS BEEN SUBJECT TO CONSIDERABLE CRITICISM FOR HIS ROLE IN THE QUITO MEETING, SAID THAT THE POSTPONEMENT SHOWED THAT VENEZUELA, COSTA RICA AND COLOMBIA HAD BEEN NOT IN ERROR IN CONVOKING THE QUITO MEETING. HE CITED THE USE OF THE "FICTION OF ABSTENTION VOTES" AND THE SUBSEQUENT EMERGENCE OF THE U.S. TRADE BILL AS INDICATIONS OF THE U.S. BELIEF THAT NOTHING SIGNIFICANT WOULD TAKE PLACE WITHIN SOUTH AMERICA AND THAT DIALOGUES WITH SECRETARY KISSINGER OUTSIDE OF THE OAS WOULD BE OF GREATER IMPORTANCE THAN THE SUBJECT RAISED BY THE MINISTERS AT QUITO. LIEVANO SAID THAT "TIME REVEALS THE TRUTH" AND THAT THE QUITO CONFERENCE WAS NOT PREMATURE. THE MINISTERS STATEMENT RECEIVED SCANT ATTENTION BY THE PRESS. SUBSEQUENT PUBLIC REACTIONS TO THE FAILURE OF THE BUENOS AIRES MEETING HAVE BEEN VERY FEW AND HAVE NOT BEEN ACCORDED MAJOR COVERAGE BY THE BOGOTA MEDIA.

3. ZEA RESIGNS AS PRESIDENT OF NATIONAL LIBERAL DIRECTORATE (DLN). SENATOR GERMAN ZEA RESIGNED AS PRESIDENT OF THE DLN FOLLOWING HIS APPOINTMENT ZJ PRESIDENT LOPEZ TO HEAD THE COLOMBIAN DELEGATION TO THE

LAW OF THE SEA CONFERENCE IN GENEVA. THE DLN IMMEDIATELY ELECTED A THREE-MEMBER EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE TO REPLACE ZEA, COMPOSED OF SENATORS MOSQUERA CHAUX, JUAN JOSE TURBAY AND GUSTAVO BALCAZAR.

4. THE APPOINTMENT OF ZEA TO HEAD THE LOS DELEGATION WAS A CONVENIENT WAY IN WHICH TO END DEFINITELY ANY REMAINING RANCOR AND DIVISIVENESS CAUSED BY THE REFUSAL OF THREE OF THE DLN'S EIGHT MEMBERS TO ACCEPT ZEA AS PRESIDENT. THE SPLIT WAS PAPERED OVER IN EARLY JAN (BOGOTA 0322) BY PRESIDENTIAL DESIGNADO TURBAY PRIOR TO HIS DEPARTURE ON A TRIP TO EUROPE.

5. THE THREE-MEMBER EXECUTIVE MAY WELL BE ONLY TEMPORARY, AS THERE IS ALREADY SOME DISSATISFACTION WITH THE ARRANGEMENT. LIBERAL MEMBERS OF THE CHAMBER REPORTEDLY ARE UNHAPPY THAT ALL THREE MEMBERS ARE SENATORS. MORE IMPORTANTLY, TWO OF THE THREE MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE, BALCAZAR AND MOSQUERA, ARE EAGER TO OCCUPY THE POSITION OF PRESIDENT OF THE CONGRESS WHEN THE PRESENT INCUMBENT, BESIGNADEO TURBAY, IS APPOINTED AMBASSADOR TO WASHINGTON, WHICH IS ALREADY TAKEN FOR GRANTED IN POLITICAL CIRCLES. BALCAZAR AND

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MOSQUERA REPORTEDLY ARE CONSIDERING LEAVING THE DLN EXECUTIVE TO ADVANCE THEIR CANDIDACIES FOR TURBAY'S JOB.

6. LABOR MINISTER HOSPITALIZED. LABOR MINISTER MARIA ELEAN DE CROVO WAS HOSPITALIZED FROM NERVOUS EXHAUSTION. LABOR RUMORS HAD HER AFFLICTED WITH A SERIOUS DISEASE. ALTHOUGH NEARLY TOTALLY ISOLATED FROM THE PUBLIC, THE MINISTER ON JANUARY 30 REPORTEDLY GRANTED A TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH EL ESPECTADOR IN WHICH SHE REVEALED

THAT SHE WAS SUFFERING FROM A SWELLING IN THE LEFT LEG AND THAT SHE EXPECTED TO BE RELEASED IN TIME TO INAUGURATE THE LAST OF A SERIES OF SEMINARS SPONSORED BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOR IN BOGOTA JANUARY 31. MEANWHILE, ON JANUARY 25 THE BANK WORK EMPLOYEES DECLARED A SEVEN-DAY MORATORIUM IN THE THREE WEEK OLD STRIKE IN ORDER TO PERMIT NEGOTIATIONS TO BEGIN WITH THE MANAGEMENT OF THE SEVERAL BANKS AFFECTED. THE CEASE-FIRE BEGAN JANUARY 27.

7. DIRTY OR HOLY WATER IN BARRANCABERMEJA? A 24-HOUR CIVIC STRIKE IN BARRANCABERMEJA JANUARY 21 WAS FOLLOWED BY A PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION JANUARY 30 IN WHICH ANOTHER STRIKE WAS DECLARED THIS TIME FOR THREE DAYS BEGINNING FEBRUARY 10. THE CIVIC UNREST IS PRIMARILY BASED ON THE SCARCITY AND UNCLEANLINESS OF WATER IN THAT CITY AND THE ALLEGED REFUSAL OF THE GOC TO TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTION. THE CIVIC ACTION HAS WIDESPREAD SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY INCLUDING THAT OF THE BISHOP OF BARRANCABERMEJA, MONSEÑOR BERNARDO ARANGO HENAO. SEVERAL LOCAL PRIESTS ARE AMONG THE LEADERS OF THE CITIZEN ACTIVITIES. ARANGO'S SUPPORT FOR THE JANUARY 21 STRIKE PROMOTED GOC MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT TO ACCUSE THE BISHOP OF "TRYING TO FOMENT A REVOLUTION WITH HOLY WATER", TO WHICH THE BISHOP REPLIED: "WE CANNOT CAUSE A REVOLUTION HERE WITH HOLY WATER BECAUSE THE WATER IS SO BAD THAT IT CANNOT EVEN BEAR A BLESSING". COMMENT: DEMONSTRATIONS AND EVEN DISTURBANCES IN BARRANCA ARE NOT UNUSUAL AND USUALLY IN REACTION TO THE POOR LIVING CONDITIONS IN THE OIL REFINERY CITY. IN ORDER TO AVOID DAMAGE TO THE REFINERY THE MILITARY, AS IT HAS IN THE PAST, HAS OCCUPIED THE TOWN. THE ADDED TWIST TO THE CURRENT DEMONSTRATION IS THE PROMINENT ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CLERGY, WHICH IN THE PAST HAS BEEN RELUCTANT TO ASSUME A LEADERSHIP ROLE.

8. RENEWED CONTROVERSY OVER GASOLINE PRICES. GASOLINE DISTRIBUTORS ATTEMPTED AGAIN DURING JANUARY TO FORCE GOC ACTION ON PRICES BY
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INSTITUTING AN UNAUTHORIZED TWENTY CENTAVO INCREASE (FROM U.S. ELEVEN CENTS PER GALLON TO TWELVE CENTS) AT A NUMBER OF STATIONS IN BOGOTA AND MEDELIN. THE GOC REFUSED TO AUTHORIZE THE INCREASE AND AFTER SEVERAL DAYS SECURED A ROLLBACK BY APPLYING FINES. IN ORDER TO KEEP STATIONS OPERATING, HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT DID AGREE TO DISCUSSIONS RE PRICE AND PROFIT MARGINS. THE EMBASSY HAS RECEIVED REPORTS FROM PRIVATE SECTOR SOURCES THAT THE GOC HAS INTIMATED IT MAY OFFER A PRICE INCREASE WHEN DIFFICULT LABOR NEGOTIATIONS WITH ECOPETROL WORKERS ARE COMPLETED. ALTHOUGH PREDICTING ACTION ON PETROLEUM POLICY IS A HAZARDOUS OCCUPATION, IT APPEARS THE GOC MAY MORE SOON TO SET HIGHER PRICES FOR GASOLINE, INCREMENTAL AND MARGINAL PRODUCTION, AND FOR NEW DISCOVERIES. PRIVATE PRODUCERS, HOWEVER, AS SCEPTICAL THAT ANY NEW PRICES WILL BE HIGH ENOUGH TO OFFER SUBSTANTIAL STIMULUS TO PRODUCTION AND EXPLORATION. ANY GASOLINE PRICE INCREASE IS LIKELY TO BE ONLY ABOUT 10-15 PERCENT,

WITH ECOPETROL CONTINUING ITS HEAVY SUBSIDY FROM FUEL OIL EXPORT EARNINGS.

9. THE DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INDUSTRIALISTS (ANDI) AND NATIONAL RETAILERS ASSOCIATION (FENALCO) RECENTLY RENEWED THEIR CRITICISM OF GOC ECONOMIC POLICY. THE FENALCO HEAD CONCENTRATED ON SPECIFIC POLICIES WHICH AFFECT RETAILERS SUCH A HIGHER SALES TAXES, CONTRABAND, AND CREDIT COSTS WHILE CRITICIZING INACTIVITY IN REVISING PETROLEUM POLICY AND STIMULATING EXPORTS. ANDI'S PRESIDENT TOOK A MORE GENERAL APPROACH NOTING APPROVAL OF MOST OF THE STABILIZATION PLAN ENACTED UNDER THE STATE OF ECONOMIC EMERGENCY BUT LAMENTING LACK OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES. HE MAINTAINED THAT WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SOME NEW CREDIT REGULATIONS THE GOC HAS NOT ACTUALLY DELINEATED POLICIES RE INDUSTRIAL SECTOR, EXPORTS, AGRICULTURE AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT. THESE STATEMENTS WERE FIRST SIGNIFICANT CRITICISM THIS YEAR OF ECONOMIC POLICY. PRIVATE SECTOR, HOWEVER, IS CLEARLY ANXIOUS FOR ADDITIONAL POLICY CLARIFICATION AND MAY BECOME MORE VOCIFEROUS IF ACTION CONTINUES TO BE DELAYED.
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